Victor Bridge Spanning the Bitterroot River Victor Vicinity Ravalli County Montana

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## PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORIC AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record National Park Service Department of The Interior Washington, D.C. 20043

## NATIONAL ARCHITECTURAL AND ENGINEERING RECORD

## Victor Bridge

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Location:

Spanning the Bitterroot River on local road joining FAP 7 on the west and FAS 269 on the east, 1 mile due east of Victor, Montana.

UTM:

Zone 11 720820 Easting 5143900 Northing SW4SW4SE4 Sec. 29, T.8 W., R.20 W. Bing 7.5' USGS Quad Map.

Date of Construction:

1907

Present Owner:

Ravalli County Ravalli County Courthouse 205 Bedford Hamilton, MT 59840

Present Use:

Vehicular bridge with access prohibited due to deteriorated condition.

Significance:

The Victor Bridge is a pin-connected Pratt through truss main span connected by two 20-ft. wood stringer span approaches. It is one of three remaining bridges of its vintage built by 0.E. Peppard, a noted and prodigious bridge engineer in the state.

Historians:

Diana Vanek and Fredric L. Quivik July, 1981 The town of Victor is situated in the center of the Bitterroot Valley in the Rocky Mountain region of western Montana. The valley trends north-south for roughly 65 miles and averages seven to eight miles wide. Approximately 1.2 miles east of town on the local road connecting U.S. 93 and the East Side Highway sits the Victor Bridge which spans the Bitterroot River, a major tributary of the Clark Fork of the Columbia River. The structure is a 148-foot pin-connected Pratt through truss main span approached at each end by a 20-foot wood stringer span for a total length of 188 feet. The main span is supported by two pairs of tubular concrete piers encased in riveted steel plate. The lower chord of the superstructure is composed of eyebars. Vertical members consist of two laced channel sections; diagonals are eyebars and turnbuckles. The upper chord is a continuous steel plate riveted atop two channel sections with batten plates riveted to their lower flanges. Thirteen wood stringers sit on the top flange of steel I-beam floor beams which are attached to the superstructure with U-bolts. Purlins (3" x 6") sit on the stringers and support the deck planking.

The Victor Bridge was constructed by O.E. Peppard, one of Montana's most prolific bridge builders between the years 1907 to 1916. Peppard came into the Montana territory in March, 1884 as foreman in the bridge and building department of the Rocky Mountain division of the Northern Pacific Railway. In 1890 he started his own business as a contractor and engineer. As of this writing, there are twenty-six extant bridges in the state of Montana that can definitely be attributed to Peppard, most of them located in western Montana. Built in 1907, the Victor Bridge is among Peppard's earliest examples of bridges yet standing in the state.

Victor represents one of the earliest agricultural communities in the Bitter-root Valley. Indeed, the valley itself can be considered the prototype of permanent settlements in the territory with a strong agricultural base, a fact which prompted W.A. Clark to call the Bitterroot Valley "the cradle of agriculture" in his centennial address on the resources of Montana. 3

Jesuit priests were successfully farming in the Bitterroot Valley by the 1840's, and agricultural development took hold by the next decade. Fruit trees were imported into the valley as early as the 1860's taking full advantage of the relatively mild climate and long growing season. The Bitterroot branch line of the Northern Pacific Railroad was begun in Missoula in 1887 and reached Victor a year later. Obviously, any improvement in the means of getting produce to market would have a beneficial effect on the community's economic growth. It also stimulated outsiders' interests in the scenic and fertile valley. There soon developed a publicity campaign focusing on the profitability and success of the fruit orchards. The coming of the railroad into the area enhanced the goals of the various promotional schemes around the turn of the century. Apple orchards were planted to attract prospective buyers, and the railway passenger trains brought in visitors to witness first-hand all the valley had to offer in terms of its natural beauty and productivity. The Bitterrooot line and the Ravalli County depots instantly became the focal point within individual communities. Establishment of a reliable crossing of the river was an exigency during this important developmental period. The Victor Bridge built in 1907 had replaced an earlier wooden structure and effectively linked both sides of the Bitterroot River and improved access to the branch line of the Northern Pacific Railroad.

The "apple boom" embodied itself in the formation of the Bitter Root Orchard Company in 1895 and within a few years purportedly had the second largest apple orchard in the country. The popular claim ran that "fruit of the Bitter Root Valley has a world-wide reputation -- especially its apples, which are entirely free from worm pests of every variety." The Bitter Root Valley Irrigation Company also figured very prominently during these years having built a large private canal for irrigation purposes called the Big Ditch. Company promoters also constructed the Bitter Root Inn, which was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. The Inn, which was near the town of Florence, burned; the plan for the complementary town of Bitterroot fell through as well. Many of the apple orchard enterprises succumbed to scab and blight. Though these ventures largely failed, they drew many people into the area. The variety of recreational opportunities as well as the raising of livestock, grains, potatoes and orchard fruits are today important aspects of the valley's economy.

For over seventy years, the Victor Bridge has served the inhabitants of the community of Victor and surrounding locale. This crossing of the Bitterroot River, the lifeblood of the valley, encouraged settlement, and through the years a larger population has become dependent on the usefulness and convenience it afforded. The structure's integrity was compromised to some extent in 1979 when an automobile crashed through the northwest end of the bridge. The damage to structural members resulted in the bridge being closed to traffic and ultimately in its replacement by a new two-lane bridge at the same location. Actions leading to the decision to replace the old Victor Bridge are outlined in the following excerpt from the County Commissioners meeting minutes dated April 17, 1980.

"In the morning, 44 Victor area residents met with the Commissioners to voice objections to the proposed closure of the Victor Crossing Bridge. Upon questioning relevant to the present situation, Commissioner Popham explained that engineering estimates produced a \$20,000 cost to temporarily repair the damaged bridge. The repairs would not withstand the high water season, and since the bridge is on this year's Road Department list, it was decided not to waste these funds on a project which would entail useage (sic) for such a limited time. In the five month period the bridge has been closed, there were no complaints made to the State Highway Department, and, thus, they assumed this was not a priority project. Bill Gross said it was the understanding of the community that the bridge would be built and they did not feel it was necessary to protest. He said the affects (sic) of the inoperational bridge are felt by the schools, mail services, and fire departments. He said the community wants the bridge and that it is essential to the growing area. Bob Olson said in order to meet the demands of progress, there is a need for better transportation and that transportation has suffered since the closing of the bridge, particularly for emergency vehicles and rescue operations. Dean Jacques, representing the School Board, said an additional 1,800 miles a year would be placed on just one school bus by the closing of the bridge. He said the Victor community is suffering from the closure, and the School Board has unanimously supported the opening of the Bridge. Ken Roberts, Fire Department, said the crossing is essential to time safety and pointed out that an extra 20 minutes is wasted by using other access routes. Mr. Simonson offered to contribute a right-of-way and materials for bridge construction if the County will provide new culverts and labor towards the project. Additional comments relevant to rescue operations and mileage hardships were made by Max Blodgett, Pete Sacks, John Lewis, Postmaster Grace Smith, George Pfau, Bill Sabo, Kathy Lewis, and Edith Nark. Gary White presented the Commissioners with a letter, with 147 signatures, in opposition to the closing of the Victor Crossing Bridge."

The degree of public attention and support of the proposed bridge replacement in 1980 firmly attests to the immediacy of providing a suitable river crossing and its important role in the everyday lives of area residents.

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## **FOOTNOTES**

- 1. Fredric L. Quivik, "Historic Bridges in Montana." Report on file, Montana Department of Highways and Montana Historical Society. 1981, p. 45.
- 2. The Missoulian Souvenir of the National Irrigation Congress: Historic and Scenic Missoula and Ravalli Counties, Montana. Compiled by Wagner and Sevigne. (Missoula, MT:n.p., c. 1899), p. 51.
- W.A. Clark, "Centennial Address on the Origin, Growth and Resources of Montana," delivered October 11, 1876. Contributions to the Historical Society of Montana, vol. II. (Helena: State Publishing Company, 1896), p. 55.
- 4. Michael P. Malone and Richard B. Roeder, Montana: A History Of Two Centuries (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1976), p. 179.
- 5. Clark, "Centennial Address," p. 54.
- 6. Mrs. Ludwig G. Browman et al., comps., <u>Some Bitterroot Memories</u>, 1860 1930: A Homey Account of the Florence Community (Missoula: Gateway Press, 1973), p. 23.
- 7. Missoulian Souvenir, p. 73.
- 8. Ibid.
- 9. Browman et al., Bitterroot Memories, p. 12.
- 10. Minutes of the Ravalli County Commissioners meeting. On file, Ravalli Courthouse, Hamilton, MT.

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